

The Future of Information

Facilitator: *Jim Whittington*

Panelists: *Jim Paxon, Retired U.S. Forest Service*
Bob Summerfield, U.S. Forest Service

Bob Summerfield

Bob is an Information Officer on a Type I Incident Management Team, but he has a day job that is not related to fire.

He pointed out a number of trends in both incidents and incident management:

- Incidents are becoming bigger and more complex--what was atypical is becoming typical.
- Immediacy--With the improvements in technology, the public is developing expectations of detailed information and they want that information in real time on incidents.
- Federal and state workforces continue to decline and positions left open by retirements will not be filled. Reduced staff will bring budget cuts and more outsourcing, making it harder to staff incidents. There may be more use of volunteers (possibly retirees) and AD employees.
- There will likely be a reduction in the number of incident management teams, meaning that teams that remain will be called out more frequently.
- There will be more concern over money and cost reductions, meaning less staff and expertise.
- The increase in Homeland Security will draw the IMTs into more diverse assignments in areas where teams have no experience or expertise.
- The shrinking world will bring more international cooperation and year-round assignments
- With all the above trends there will be continuing and increased pressure to consolidate the fire/IMT system and there may be a National Fire Service or Incident Management Service that would roll all the IMTs into a FEMA-like organization. Information Officers may have to make a choice as to staying with their original agency or moving on to this new, bigger organization. Information officer skill needs will change, demanding more management and supervisory skills with an understanding of strategic planning.

His wish list for what he would like to see happen is as follows.

- Institutionalism for the PIO position in the IMT system, appreciation of the PIO skills.
- A recruiting system for PIOs and others incident management team positions.
- Incentives for going out on fire. A backup system at people's main jobs to help people out, special consideration for advancement and consideration of skill improvements attained by fire assignments. Emphasis placed on training, both traditional skills and new technology.
- Improved information exchange between PIOs involving national and regional PIO meetings, interagency details and a fire information web page.
- Agencies need to set aside two to five percent of their funding to allow people going on fires to prepare at home for incidents.
- Super-sized incidents have super-sized information centers and they seem to be reinvented at every large incident. Need to have standing fire information teams for mega events, standard teams that could set up large information centers quickly.

Bottom line—There will be a definite need for leadership in fire information in the future.

Jim Paxon

Jim talked about how the NPS is good at documenting and interpreting history, mentioning the Peshtigo Fire in 1871 that burned 1.2 million acres and killed 1,500 people. He also mentioned the 1910 fire that burned 3 million acres in four days leaving 85 dead. He surmised that the repercussions if a similar incident happened today would be much greater. He said fire levels wax and wane, however, large spikes of major fire events like those of the past few years go beyond the normal cycles.

He believes that NPS fire information officers bring interpretation and education to the PIO role, but they should be truthful about the situation. “Tell what it is,” he said, “even if it is bad.” He also noted that there were two kinds of IOs, “those that have seen fatalities and those that will.”

He continued, “if we look into the future, bad times are coming and we had better get ready.” Information officers must be prepared to handle the increase in media turning up on large fires; on one recent large fire his communications team was handling 2000 calls per day. He is a dedicated spokesperson who keeps everything to a 6th grade level—simple and to the point.

Jim’s strategy is to surround himself with good people to whom he can delegate various roles within information. These must be people whom can be trusted to do the job and people with whom you must be willing to lean on for help as well as support when they need help.

Jim was on fire 83 days last year and 101 in 2001. Fire IOs must be able to “speak fire,” know the language and strategies and tactics. On large fires there can be up to 50 PIOs, teams should plan for this potential by having a “gaggle” of PIOs in a “strike team” that could be on standby in weekly or monthly shifts ready to be called out on two-hour notice. He said the future of wildland fire will be bigger, faster, and more damaging and that the high fuel load situations will bring spikes in fire activity and information officers need to be ready.

He also said that there needs to be more mentoring and coaching of younger PIOs. When there is a fire in a national park, Jim has observed a resistance to allowing PIOs to talk to visitors, but we should take advantage of the situation and educate everyone possible about wildland fire.